
Hervé Barbier, Les Canonnières françaises du Yang-tsé : de Shanghai à Chongqing (1900-1921)

Paris, Les Indes Savantes, 2004, 286 p.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Philip Liddell

- 1 Since France's diplomatic archives on the Far East were transferred to Nantes, a number of academic researchers have based their research on them. This in turn has generated half a dozen master's degree dissertations, whose conclusions have been incorporated into the book directed by Jacques Weber, *La France en Chine 1843-1943*, published in Nantes (Ouest Edition) in 1997. Hervé Barbier's book is more ambitious, coming within the scope of a thesis. To the Nantes sources he adds those he has found in the *Service Historique de La Marine* (the Naval Historical Service) in Vincennes and Toulon, as well as various personal archives. The result is a serious piece of work, with an index and photographic illustrations, but disappointing. The subject is, indeed, rather slight: a few decades of the history of a flotilla of three or four "soapboxes", ill-adapted for ill-defined missions: thanks to the skills of their crews, they provided protection for the French flag between Yichang in Hubei and Suifu (now Yibin) in Sichuan. Protecting the flag occasionally meant going to the aid of steamboats that were really Chinese but flying the French tricolour, which were used in the arms trade or for the traffic in opium. There are a few good pages describing life on board or in various ports of call for these matelots in faraway waters, evoking encounters between Breton sailors and missionaries speaking their language and sharing their homesickness—but such pages do not erase the sense of unease that reading this book left me with.

- 2 Probably because of a few mistakes. I was unimpressed by the thinness of a bibliography that leaves out that essential work on the subject, the book by Lyman P. van Slyke, *Yangtze: Nature, History and the River* (Stanford, Ca., Stanford University Press, 1988). Perhaps, also, I was surprised by a hasty and biased historical account of the cruel bombardment of the city of Wanxian in Sichuan (p. 128) by two British gunboats on September 5th 1926. Their attack killed hundreds of innocent Chinese civilians, a paradigm for that infamous “gunboat diplomacy”.
- 3 Herein lies, without doubt, the weakness of the book: the writer takes an exclusive position alongside these sailors adopting, a century later, the prejudices and behaviour of their times. Thus, he is at the side of Lieutenant Hourst, commanding the *Olry*, which had just sailed through the terrible Yangtse gorges in August 1902: Hourst acted on the basis of a “completely exaggerated” (p. 73) missionary report in giving offence to the Viceroy of Sichuan. This officer was a typical adventurer of those colonial times, and was disowned by the Navy Minister Pelletan, who condemned that “semi-episcopal, semi-military tour”: the radical minister’s perfectly republican attitude was obviously displeasing to our author. Neither did he appreciate (p. 193) the indigenisation policy within the Catholic clergy in China, as pursued by Cardinal Constantini, whom he accuses of threatening France’s religious protectorate over Chinese Catholics. As you may see, this book is something of a time machine.